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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000680

SIPDIS

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TAGS: KDEM PGOV PHUM PREL BG
SUBJECT: MASS ARRESTS IN BANGLADESH, 32,000 NETTED

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY
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¶1. (C) Between May 28 and June 15 the Government of
Bangladesh (GOB) arrested nearly 32,000 individuals in a
nationwide crackdown, reportedly to improve the law and order
situation in the country. Civil society groups and political
parties have criticized the drive. Media reports suggest the
GOB,s initiative is expected to last until June 30. The
Home Secretary privately disavowed any political motive for
the arrests, claiming most of the individuals were facing
criminal charges and only a small fraction were political
activists or brought into custody under the Emergency Powers
Rules. Media and local human rights groups tell a different
story however, suggesting a campaign of intimidation against
Bangladesh's two main political parties intended both to
bring them back to the negotiating table and to thwart large
scale political demonstrations using "rent-a-crowds."

GOB: MOST ARRESTED ARE CRIMINALS
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¶2. (C) According to local media reports, authorities had
arrested 31,829 people as of June 15. Confirming what we had
heard elsewhere, the Home Secretary told the DCM earlier that
week that the numbers of people arrested did not greatly
exceed arrests for the same period last year. Home Affairs
Adviser M.A. Matin told the media that police had arrested
approximately 24,000 people between May 29 and June 12, up
from 19,000 during the same period last year. While initial
reports indicated most of the arrests were occurring in
localities around Bangladesh, it now appears that as many as
75 percent of the arrests are taking place in Dhaka,
according to media contacts.

¶3. (C) Home Secretary Abdul Karim told the DCM that
virtually all those detained were criminals arrested based on
existing warrants; the authorities had arrested fewer than
191 people under Emergency Power Rules. (NOTE: Individuals
arrested under Emergency Power Rules (EPR) are denied bail.
END NOTE.) And even fewer of those arrested had ties to
political parties, according to Karim, who added that 35 of
those arrested were affiliated with the Bangladesh
Nationalist Party (BNP), while 36 had Awami League ties.
Karim added that authorities arrested these party figures on
the basis of criminal charges.

¶4. (C) Despite the large number of arrests, the prison
population nationwide has not increased appreciably. In
fact, it has remained steady at just under 87,000, according
to the Inspector General of Police responsible for the
nation's prisons. Both the Home Secretary and Home Adviser
said that many of those arrested had been released on bail
and that approximately 1,200 prisoners were being released
every day. The GOB recently announced it would begin to

parole certain prisoners who had served at least 50 percent
of their sentence, as a means of alleviating overcrowding in
Bangladesh's prisons.

CIVIL SOCIETY DISPUTES GOB CLAIMS
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¶5. (C) Despite GOB statements, non-governmental
organizations (NGOs) and political parties allege grassroots
political activists and local officials are being rounded up
along with extremists and common criminals. Early in June,
representatives from the U.S.-based National Democratic
Institute (NDI), which implements USG-funded programs with
political parties in Bangladesh, reported authorities had
arrested over 350 people with ties to the BNP or Awami League
in districts outside of Dhaka. According to NDI, their
contacts in all the parties were fearful that more party
activists would be detained.

¶6. (C) Human rights groups dispute GOB statements that the
arrests are part of the normal cycle of the criminal justice
system. Unable to account for why the prison population has
not increased significantly, human rights activists claimed,
in meetings with PolOff, a number of individuals might be
held in local police jails or facilities run by Bangladesh's
intelligence services. The activists also speculated that
the police may be arresting some people for the purposes of
intimidation and releasing them within 24 hours on the
payment of bribes. Several sources stated the police were
picking up individuals under preventive detention laws such
as the Special Powers Act of 1974 and charging them by
attaching their names to existing cases. According to some

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NGO's, authorities added the names of some of those arrested
to the open cases pending against those accused of
participating in the August 2007 riots. (NOTE: Bangladesh
law permits the filing of cases against unnamed defendants,
which allows authorities to add individuals to the cases even
after they have been filed. END NOTE.)

COMMENT
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¶7. (C) Despite GOB claims that recent arrest levels are
normal, the government's own figures indicate a 25 percent
increase in arrests over the last two weeks. The law and
order drive could be a shot across the bow of the two main
political parties; the GOB launched the drive shortly after
the two parties announced their refusal to participate in the
Caretaker Government's political dialogue. There is also
speculation that many of the detained "political activists"
are in some cases the petty gangsters and thugs hired by the
parties to organize the often-violent party protests that
were a regular part of Bangladesh's political landscape in
the past. Mission Dhaka has registered concern about the
crackdown at the highest levels of government; we continue to
urge the GOB to adhere to international standards of human
rights and due process with regard to the arrest and
incarceration of all those arrested, including those detained
in the current drive.
Moriarty